



"The Searchers": An American Dilemma

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become everything for him: sky, earth, water, landscape . . . it's him, woman. So how can he see her? That is the story of the film. The story of a voyage seeking for something that can never be met because you are in it. And, what's more, he doesn't want to come out of it, for profound reasons of his own. In fact, the end itself, if I wanted to apply a cheap form of symbolism, could be seen in this key: the tunnel, the uterus, and the train, the rigid thing, which wishes to enter but is instead sucked up by it . . .

In all accounts of reincarnation the people telling of their being "reborn" invariably describe the act of it as coming out through a long, dark tunnel, and how painful the outside is, how unwillingly they are forced through the channel, almost like a punishment. There is opposition to recognizing the world, just in the same manner you describe: the protagonist's inability to perceive that which he is too much in the middle of. Now if we take your equation of cinema—woman—world,

your film, in a way, becomes a metaphor for our not taking cognizance of our world as a result of being too much inside of it. "The world is too much with us . . ." Is that an interpretation of City of Women which you could accept?

Decidedly. In fact, I wish you would write these things. How we do not really perceive our own world . . . Said simply, like this, without too much cultural or theosophic suggestivity . . . I myself feel embarrassed to speak of my film in these terms. I am not called upon to discuss my film but to make it. I don't like to come on explaining, why did Pinocchio meet his father in the belly of the whale, why do the cat and the fox hang him, why doesn't he die once hung . . . it makes no sense, all these explanations, and it is stupid, mortifying for the film, covering it with this cage network of interpretations, until it becomes unrecognizable in the end. Unrecognizable even to myself.

Well, we'd better stop talking about it, then.

BRIAN HENDERSON

The Searchers: An American Dilemma

Dedicated to the memory of
James Blue, 1930-1980

In a 1979 article, Stuart Byron surveys the influence of John Ford's film *The Searchers* (1956) on several young directors and screenwriters.¹ "In one way or another," he concludes, "the film relates to Paul Schrader, John Milius, Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, and Michael Cimino; to *Hardcore*, *Taxi Driver*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Dillinger*, *Mean Streets*, *Big Wednesday*, *The Deer Hunter*, *The Wind and the Lion*, *Ulzana's Raid*, and *Star Wars* . . . When one film obsesses so much talent, it won't do just to call it a cult movie. *The Searchers* is the Super-Cult movie of the New Hollywood."

The film-makers Byron discusses do not hesitate to confirm his argument. Milius: "The best American movie—and its protagonist, Ethan Edwards, is the one classic character in films. I've named

my own son Ethan after him. I've seen it 60 times." Schrader: "I make sure I see *The Searchers* at least once a year. God knows that there are movies that are better acted or better written, but *The Searchers* play the fullest artistic hand." "Scorsese and I agree that *The Searchers* is the best American film, a fact that must have influenced *Taxi Driver*." Scorsese: "The dialogue is like poetry! And the changes of expressions are so subtle, so magnificent! I see it once or twice a year." Spielberg: "*The Searchers* has so many superlatives going for it. It's John Wayne's best performance . . . It's a study in dramatic framing and composition. It contains the single most harrowing moment in any film I've ever seen. It is high on my twenty-favorite-film list." Spielberg says he has seen the film a dozen times, including twice on location with *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

Byron argues that four recent films in particular have a basic story structure identical to and in-

spired by *The Searchers: Taxi Driver, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, The Deer Hunter, and Hard Core*. In each, "an obsessed man searches for someone—a woman, a child, a best friend—who has fallen into the clutches of an alien people. But when found, the sought one doesn't want to be rescued."

There has been a good deal of writing on *The Searchers*, as film criticism goes. In "Critics on *The Searchers*," Edward Buscombe summarizes the work of several Ford critics—John Baxter, J. A. Place, Andrew Sarris, Michael Wilmington, and Joseph McBride.

Despite their sense that the film is concerned with questions of history the critics do not in practice pay much attention to this. What is ultimately of concern is the artistry with which the film organizes the audience's responses to the characters . . . The actual way in which the critics deal with questions of character in the film . . . lead[s] us all the time towards articulating what it is the characters are like, what motivates them, how they understand each other and how they are to be understood by us . . . All these critics, then, to some extent treat the film as though it were a psychological novel.¹

What Buscombe does not say, perhaps because it is obvious, is that critics of *The Searchers* have been notably focussed on one character in particular, Ethan Edwards. Indeed, preoccupation with Ethan and his motives has been a constant of commentary on the film since it first appeared. Lindsay Anderson, who did not like the film, was as centered on the character of Ethan as those later critics who esteem it supremely.

The Searchers begins with a promise . . . yet somehow, curiously, the effect is cold. . . . Lack of intensity in all [its] echoes reminds us that it is not enough just to set Ford down among the mesas . . . he has to have a story—or at least a theme. And the story of *The Searchers* . . . does not turn out to be a good one for him. In the first place there is too much of it. The pictures Ford has himself produced in the last ten years . . . have relied less and less on narrative and more and more on mood.

The Searchers is a long and complicated story, spread over eight or nine years. Moreover its hero, Ethan Edwards, is an unmistakable neurotic, devoured by an irrational hatred of Indians and half breeds, shadowed by some mysterious crime. His search for his little niece . . . abducted by Comanches seems . . . inspired less by love or honour than by an obsessive desire to do her to death as a contaminated creature. Now what is Ford, of all directors, to do with a hero like this?²

Even one of the trade magazines spoke of a "problem of motivation" in a review that appeared before the film's release.

The box office appeal of John Wayne combined with the imprint of John Ford makes *The Searchers* a contender for the big money stakes. It's a Western in the grand manner—handsomely mounted and in the tradition of *Shane*. . . . Yet *The Searchers* is somewhat disappointing. . . . Overlong and repetitious at 119 minutes there are subtleties in the basically simple story that are not adequately explained. . . . Wayne, the uncle of the kidnapped girl, is a complex character. His motivations, from the time he appears out of the southwest plains at his brother's ranch to his similar exit after he accomplishes his mission, are unclear. . . . Wayne is a bitter, taciturn individual throughout and the reasons for his attitude are left to the imagination of the viewer. (*Variety*, March 14, 1956)³

There is not one point in these passages but several: a centering on Ethan; a centering on Ethan's motives; and finding a problem with Ethan's motives, usually followed by an attempt to solve it. We have not space to sort these out so we treat the "preoccupation with Ethan" as a single thing.

T. S. Eliot has warned against critical fascination with a fascinating character. "Few critics have even admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and *Hamlet* the character only secondary."⁴ Our analysis seeks to focus on *The Searchers* the film, not *The Searchers* the saga of Ethan Edwards. This attempt opposes the weight of prior commentary: it has never been doubted that *The Searchers* concerns the uneasy relations between the restless hero, half-civilized, half-savage, and the community he benefits.

Vladimir Propp counsels that the motivations of characters have nothing to do with the structure of narrative.

Motivations belong to the most inconstant and unstable elements of the tale. . . . Completely identical or similar acts are motivated in the most varied ways . . . [which] has no influence on the structure of the course of action, i.e., on the search as such. . . . One may observe in general that the feelings and intentions of the dramatic personas do not have an effect on the course of action in any instances at all.⁵

Propp's formulae on motivation hold good for the entire "structural analysis of the narrative" tradition—Lévi-Strauss, Greimas, Todorov, Barthes. Despite his motivational complications, Ethan does function rather conventionally as the hero of *The Searchers* in structural terms. His ambiguous motives do not prevent, they do not even qualify his performance of the hero's functions in the film.*

*There is a Proppian problem in the film's doubled hero: it is Martin who kills Scar, recovers Debbie, and marries Laurie.

Ethan
in the
homestead:
THE
SEARCHERS



But *The Searchers* itself foregrounds the problem of Ethan and his motivations through the song that begins and ends the film. The first part of the song is played over the titles, its last words overlapping the figure of Ethan as he slowly approaches his brother's house: "What makes a man to wander? What makes a man to roam? What makes a man to leave bed and board and turn his back on home? Ride away, ride away, ride away." The second part of the song is played at the end of the film over images of the settlers entering the house and Ethan turning away. "A man will search in heart and soul, go searching way out there. His peace of mind he knows he'll find, but where, O Lord, O where? Ride away, ride away, ride away." The first part of the song poses a question that we expect the film to answer. The second part of the song also poses a question, but this time we know that the film will answer neither one. The second question is rhetorical, suggesting that Ethan will not find peace of mind and that his response to this is to ride away. (The second part of the song has another function: it tells us that Ethan *is* riding away, not just going back to feed his horse before going into the house.)

The song that frames *The Searchers* seems to parallel the poem that opens *Young Mr. Lincoln*,

itself a series of questions. In the *Cahiers* reading, the main function of the poem is to pretend that its questions haven't been answered yet, whereas the film itself presumes the spectator's knowledge of Lincoln. Through this "feigned indecisiveness" the film effects a naturalization of the Lincoln myth. The function of the song in *The Searchers* is opposite to this. In *Lincoln* the audience knows the answers to the questions before the film begins; in *The Searchers* the audience does not know the answers to the questions even after the film is over.

To displace Ethan from the center of *The Searchers* thus seems to oppose the film itself; but the foregrounding of Ethan and his problems may be read as a ruse of the text (though not of its makers) to deflect attention from more important and hidden matters. This analysis of *The Searchers* seeks to explore different patterns of signification and to use different methods of criticism than prior criticism of the film has done. Of course it is a "reading" of the film, but it does not have the closed or completed quality that the notion of reading suggests; it will be enough if this analysis succeeds in displacing discussion of the film. Its point of departure is the extraordinary power of *The Searchers* as film-myth on a number of film-makers, critics, and other viewers, a power that might also be defined by the number of intelligent viewers that the film intensely repels. The moral-psychological critics whom Buscombe discusses,

although arguably he does the first two as Ethan's helper. We deal with this in a separate essay.

who are also thoroughly "author-centered," tend to assume the film's power in a way that precludes raising it as a problem. Insofar as they consider it they attribute the film's impact on audiences to the artistry of its director. But if myth is viewed as a collective phenomenon then the power of a myth can only be explained by reference to the community that responds to it.

This analysis has several methodological inspirations. The first is Lévi-Straussian myth analysis with its Freudian emphasis on the unconscious dimension, and its Marxist emphasis on the materialist interpretation, of collective phenomena. From Lévi-Strauss we take the notion that myths (and other public narratives) have an unconscious component, formed by public conflicts rather than private ones. These are contradictions either in social life or in knowledge; they explain why listeners are stirred by myths and why myths are told again and again. When these conflicts fade in social life, the power of the myth is lessened until it "dies." The myth operates by transposing the terms of the actual conflict into other sets of terms, usually in the form of binary oppositions.* It is the resolution of the transposed oppositions, substituted for the real conflict, that gives the myth a palliative effect. That this effect is a kind of deception accounts for the pejorative sense of the word "mythical," even in Lévi-Strauss. He refuses to budge in calling myth "inauthentic" because it operates to deflect humans from identifying and resolving their actual problems. Finally, the operation of a myth—both its construction from actual conflicts and its impact on audiences—always has to do with the time in which the myth is told, not with the time that it tells of. Thus *The Searchers* has to do with 1956, not with the 1868–1873 period in which it is set.

We also draw upon the *Cahiers du cinéma* analysis of *Young Mr. Lincoln*,⁷ which uses Lévi-Strauss, among other sources, but proceeds quite differently. Lévi-Strauss overlooks the text's specific modes of unfolding and elaboration in order to study its structure. *Cahiers* does its Lévi-Straus-

sian and other analyses off-stage, then devotes its analysis to reading them back into the unfolding text. Our analysis also benefits from Charles Eckert's reading of *Marked Woman*,⁸ notably its casual but effective combination of Lévi-Straussian method and ideological analysis and its analysis of the gangster as an overdetermined figure of displacement in many films.

The Searchers is explicitly concerned with a number of anthropological issues. On its surface it treats questions of kinship, race, marriage, and the relations between tribes. These questions also have to do with the identity, status, and responsibilities of individuals: Who is responsible for the retrieval and burial of the dead, for the search and recovery of captives, for vengeance? Who can marry whom? Which marriages are binding? Which are not?

The wealth of anthropological material in *The Searchers* is itself a problem: how to proceed? Let us begin with two parallel sets of relationships that appear to structure the film. With ethnographic accuracy, the film designates Martin Pawley as one-eighth Cherokee by descent. As a child Martin was rescued (by Ethan) from an Indian raid that killed his parents; Martha and Aaron Edwards adopted him and raised him as a member of their family. Martin's parents were white settlers like the Edwards but as our analysis will show, he functions as an Indian in the symbolics of the film, more precisely as an Indian who has become an adopted white. Martin marries Laurie Jorgenson, who is white.

Debbie Edwards is captured by Scar and his band when she is ten. She is raised as a Comanche until she reaches puberty, then becomes Scar's

*Lévi-Strauss's binarism, his postulate that all myths (and kinship and totemistic structures) are built out of sets of binary oppositions, which he seems to ground in the structure of the brain itself, has been much attacked. The consensus now seems to be that binarism fits some situations well but as a universal principle of the formation of culture it is untenable.



wife. The parallelism is evident. White woman is adopted and raised by red society, marries a red man; (part) red man is adopted and raised by white society, marries a white woman. This textual parallel poses an exchange between red and white tribes, at best a de facto exchange since there is no alliance between them. Indeed, both inter-tribal transfers take place in violence or as a result of violence; and each tribe subjects the outsider to a total reconditioning, designed to obliterate the effects of previous filiation, as part of its adoption process.* This is an "exchange" between warring tribes, between which there can be no lawful exchange and no lawful marriage.

Still, the film's parallel adoptions and marriages constitute a de facto exchange, an implied contract with reciprocal obligations to fulfill; but the film poses this symmetry only to collapse it. Indian law and adoption, intermarriage on Indian terms are not recognized by the white settlers or by the film that takes their part; only white law and adoption and intermarriage on white terms are recognized. The film's surface progress is toward "recovery of Debbie" but this implies, and the film hardly disguises it, a progress toward the destruction of Indian law and Indian society. This is accomplished in the final Ranger/Cavalry charge that destroys the Indian military force and, metonymically, Indian society itself. There can be only one law, one definition of persons and relationships. *The Searchers* presents the violent triumph of that law, annihilating everything that opposes it or that it defines as "other."

This "collapse" of the film's apparent structuring opposition is itself one of the film's principal ideological and semantic operations. It is certainly overdetermined, that is, required by a number of different systems at work in the film. Let us consider briefly the figure of Debbie. Her choice to stay with the Comanches and with Scar is overridden by Ethan and Martin. Only their methods differ: Ethan wants to shoot her, Martin wants to abduct her. But the text itself rides roughshod

over Debbie by making her change her mind suddenly when Martin appears to take her away, a conspicuously unmotivated act in a film that elsewhere supplies too many motives.

The figure of Debbie functions as an object in several other senses also. In Propp and Greimas, she is the object of value transferred from the good kingdom to the evil kingdom and back, over whom hero and villain fight to the death. In Lévi-Straussian anthropology, she is a wife exchanged for whom no other wife can be returned—the offered Indian wife Look is repudiated; therefore she must be recovered. Debbie is equated with her sexuality, by Ethan and Laurie at least, so that, "contaminated" by Scar, she can only be disposed of. All this is overdetermined by the system of sexual identity and the system of subject formation of which it is a foundation. This system has a negative dimension—how men and women may not be portrayed—as well as a positive one. It is inconceivable that a man be cast in the Debbie role or a woman in the Martin role. In classical cinema, aside from some "women's pictures," named and produced as a distinct genre, a special case, a man cannot be the object of value except briefly, e.g., Dean Martin's capture in *Rio Bravo*, from which, however, he delivers himself. And a woman cannot except briefly be a seeker, a searcher, cannot be put in the place of performances, of proving herself through action, as Martin is. Nor can she serve apprenticeships, which make her the subject of a becoming. She is defined and valued always in herself not for herself, that is, as object. This means, among other things, that she cannot change her social or racial allegiance by her own choice—they are not hers to change.

Thus the system of sexual identity requires that the parallelism of adoptions/marriages collapse and that it collapse on the feminine side. What about the opposition between red and white laws? The shift from a conflict between two laws to a conflict within one law is also fundamental to the film's ideological and semantic operations. First of all, it obscures the fact that the white settlers and their government, for personal and public gain, destroyed many Indian civilizations and damaged others, subjecting the survivors to white law. The film recasts the struggle between red and white laws as a conflict within one law, an Ideal Law supposed to reign over all humans. Then it

*But note that Debbie remembers her white childhood and language "from always," whereas Martin is a total amnesiac about his childhood, which, though among whites, stands in metaphorically for his Indian ancestry. Similarly, it is Ethan later who "speaks good Comanch"; Martin speaks it hardly at all despite five years' travelling among the tribes.

casts the Indians as criminals under this law and casts the white settlers, Rangers, and Cavalry as the law's agents, who punish the Indians for their transgressions. The film is precisely structured along this axis, beginning with horrible crimes by the Comanches, which follow no acts by whites but initiate the cycle of violence gratuitously, and proceeding through intermediate stages to their punishment by whites at the end.

This structure is ideological in the traditional sense: a distortion of history in the interests of a particular class; but it is also a psychoanalytic structure. The *Cahiers* reading of *Lincoln* elucidates this.

It is in the constantly renewed relationship of this group [the white settlers] with another (the Indians), in the dualism of Ford's universe that the inscription of the structural imperative of Law which dictates the deferment of desire and imposes exchange and alliance is realized, in violence, guided by the mediating action of the hero (often a bastard) who is placed at its intersection.⁹

Scar's crimes—rape, murder, dismemberment, burning—eminently violate the law that dictates postponement of pleasure. His acts stand in for the terrifying libido that must be repressed and, if unrepressed, must be punished drastically. His crimes “stand in” for libido because, of course, libido cannot be represented. The film doubles this nonrepresentability by not showing Scar's actions or even their consequences—we see not one dead body of the murdered family. These actions and their consequences are evoked only by Ethan's grimaces and outbursts and even he most often operates to suppress representation—“Don't let him go in there, Mose,” “I buried Lucy back there with my own hands; I thought it best to keep it from you,” “What do you want me to do, draw you a picture?” “As long as you live don't ever ask me that.” This requires the viewer to project unconscious fantasies into the film, which greatly increases the viewer's involvement in it. Put oversimply, the viewer identifies unconsciously with Scar's acts and also with the need for punishing them. This process, which gives pleasure by exercising libido and ego reassurance by suppressing it, imaginatively reconstitutes the structure of the self, thereby promoting what has been called “the maintenance of the subject.”

In both *Lincoln* and *The Searchers* there is an early crime and a subsequent movement, the bulk of each film, toward cancelling it. “It is from this

ideal Law that originated the cancellation of the criminal act in the fiction [and] the position of the Mother as the figure of forbidden violence (pleasure).”¹⁰ As *Cahiers* argues, Lincoln is both the figure of ideal law (taking it over from his mother and Mrs. Clay) and the agent of its inscription. This forbids his resort to physical force and thereby denies the film “the usual bisection of [Ford's] fiction and the sometimes truly epic inscription of Law thereby articulated.”¹¹ In the case of *Lincoln*, this “produce[s] the Law as a pure prohibition of violence, whose result is a permanent indictment of the castrating effects of its discourse.”¹² But the inscription of law in *The Searchers* is epic indeed—the consequence of colorful adventures by action heroes, leading to a death struggle between hero and villain and an exuberant charge on the enemy's village. The party of repression confronts the party of libido in open battle. These epic lures obscure the grim business of inscribing the law that dictates postponement of pleasure—which stands forth nakedly in *Lincoln*. (But isn't Lincoln's courtroom battle with J. Palmer Cass a kind of verbal epic?) Scar is scalped, i.e., castrated, for which his name as well as his crime has predestined him.

It is the character of the mother that incarnates the idealized figure of Ideal Law in Ford's fiction. . . . often, as in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the widowed mother, guardian of the deceased father's law. It is for her that the men (the regiment) sacrifice the cause of their desire, and under her presidency that the Fordian celebration takes place; this in fact consists in a simulacrum of sexual relations from which all effective desire is banned.¹³

The mother who incarnates Ideal Law in *The Searchers* is evidently Martha. She is murdered in the initial crime, but it is she whom Ethan and Martin serve, for her that they pursue Debbie, recover her, and punish Scar and his followers. That she is the figure of forbidden pleasure is also clear: first for Ethan, who loves her without hope of fulfillment; second for her husband Aaron, who toils for her and, by staying on the frontier, gives up his life—“She just wouldn't let a man quit”; and, after her death, for Ethan and Martin, who devote their energies to her cause for five years, like Lincoln taking over the mother's function by looking after her children. But from this point there is a division in Ideal Law. When Debbie refuses to leave Scar, Ethan seeks to impose the law of postponing pleasure by shooting her. Laurie

invokes the authority of Martha for this policy, "You know what Ethan will do if he has a chance? He'll put a bullet in her brain and I tell you Martha would want it." But Martin is also acting for Martha when he does all that he can to protect Debbie, from Ethan as well as from Scar. This confusion at the heart of ideal law is one of the most disturbing aspects of *The Searchers*; it reverberates in every corner of the film.

The undoing of Debbie's adoption and marriage and of the Indian law that sanctions them turns us back to Martin's adoption and marriage and to the white law that sanctions them and prescribes their terms. Martin's adoption and marriage are the "relation left over" when the originally posed symmetry collapses, hence they are of particular interest. Martin's adoption is treated on the surface of the film as a long-accomplished fact, but beneath the surface the nature, meaning, and consequences of his adoption are far from settled. Even on its surface, the film uses the character of Ethan to question what has long been settled, notably the matter of Martin's "Indian blood" and his kinship status as an adopted Edwards (white). (It is only one duplicity of a frequently duplicitous film that Ethan is punished for his disturbing the social order by exclusion from the community, though this in some way is duplicitous also.) As in *Young Mr. Lincoln*, the unconscious material lies partly on the surface of the film but arranged so as to be partly unreadable. This makes analysis considerably more difficult than simply identifying unconscious structures. The surface of *The Searchers* is broken again and again by the edges of contradictions that lie at deeper levels. This implies, which is true, that the surface of the film is contradictory, even incoherent, in a different way. It is Ford's skill as a film-maker that covers over and disguises these breaks again and again, indeed that makes a flowing filmic text out of them.

We first see Martin riding a horse bareback and sliding off in front of the Edwards' open side door; he is late for dinner. The wilderness outside the door, Max Steiner's exuberant theme, Martin's high spirits, his effortless transition from exterior to interior—these signify an ideal boyhood spent in oneness with nature. The film will soon shatter this idyll ruthlessly by taking away all of Martin's adopted family, except his hostile uncle, making

him an orphan again. But it shatters the idyll even sooner by initiating another signification set: Martin's skin is quite dark and he wears a loose, colored shirt buttoned at the neck, giving him the appearance of an Indian. It is Indians who ride bareback and, in American mythology, it is only Indians who are completely at one with the environment. Martin steps tentatively into the room. The surface question: he is late for dinner, will he be scolded? covers an other question: he is an Indian, will he be welcome at the table? Much of the textual problematic revolving around Martin is posed in this scene, though in disguised form. As it happens, Martin does have cause to worry on this particular evening, for his Uncle Ethan has returned. Martin is introduced and takes his seat sheepishly. Ethan looks at him suspiciously and says, "A fellow could mistake you for a 'breed'." Martin says that he is one-eighth Cherokee, the rest English and Welsh. Martha recalls that it was Ethan who found Martin after Indians killed his parents; to which Ethan replies, "It just happened to be me. No need to make any more of it." Ethan just glares at Martin following this remark; Martha deflects his anger by saying, "More coffee, Ethan?" Then the dinner scene simply ends, in the way that Ford sometimes ends a scene, with no dramatic rounding out, no ellipsis marks. There is a cut to Martin sitting on the steps of the porch with the family dog, half turned toward the door, as though Ethan's hostility has expelled him from the family group. After a scene with the adults inside, Aaron joins Martha in the bedroom and closes the door while Ethan sits on the porch with the dog, as Martin did earlier.

In the morning, they ride after Jorgenson's cattle. When Martin calls Ethan "Uncle," Ethan says that he is not his uncle, and not to call him grandpa or Methuselah either, since he can whip him to a frazzle. What should Martin call him? Name is Ethan. The game of names between Ethan and Martin is another textual duplicity. "I am not your uncle" means that Martin is not kin to the Edwards children, to whom Ethan is uncle, but the rest of Ethan's discourse turns this into a point of personal bravado and frontier democracy.

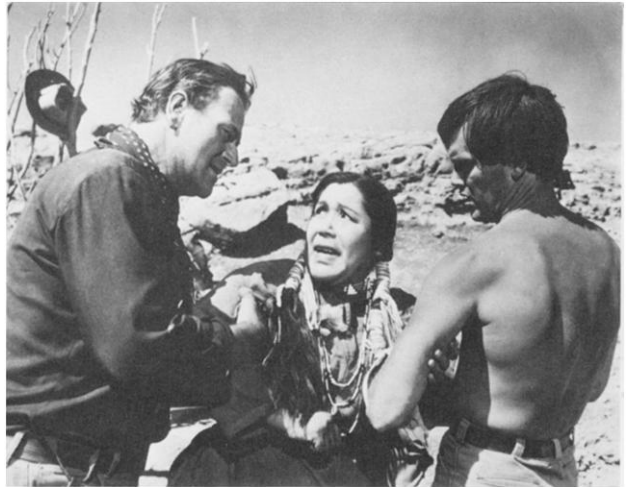
The events following Scar's raid on the Edwards reveal Ethan's deep knowledge of Comanche ways, of horses, of the wilderness. He rests his horse before riding to the rescue, so he rides by Martin

who has ridden his horse to death.* This and other incidents show that, despite Ethan's hostility, Martin has a great deal to learn from him. Others show that Ethan is a good guide and teacher during Martin's five-year apprenticeship. He lets Martin see and know only what he can handle—he does not let him see Martha's body or, later, Lucy's, does not mention that he found Lucy dead, etc. Ethan also holds Martin back, hoisting him by the collar like a schoolboy, to prevent his following Brad into the Comanche camp.

Ethan's hostility to Martin begins at the Edwards dinner table but is restrained there. On the trail it bursts forth in a string of insults and epithets. "Come on, blankethead," (twice). "What does a quarter-blood [sic] Cherokee know about the Comanche trick of sleepin' with his best pony by his side?" When Martin says he thinks they're being followed (he's right), Ethan says, "That's just the Injun in you."

A large figure of textual features has to do with Martin's kinship. Many of his wrangles with Ethan have to do with whether or not he is Debbie's "brother" or otherwise her kin so as to justify his searching for her year after year. As noted these discussions may also be read as treating Martin's status as an adopted white. The kinship question is treated by the text at several different levels and often these levels are mixed or fused.

When the Comanches attack the pursuit party, Martin almost faints after his first shot. Mose Harper takes his rifle, Martin revives and starts firing with his hand gun. This is "the young man's initiation in battle"—Anthony Perkins did this bit in *Friendly Persuasion* the same year. Below the surface, the issue is Martin's firing on his blood kinsmen. The film is quite attentive to where Martin's loyalties lie at this moment of decision. A parallel issue is raised when Martin inadvertently acquires a Comanche wife. He cannot send her



Ethan and Martin manhandle the Indian "wife"

back because Ethan says it will bring her tribe down on them; but Martin's misery at her being there, his kicking her away when she lies down beside him, makes clear where his loyalties lie. Ethan's calling her Mrs. Pawley and baiting Martin about her link up with his other jibes about Martin as an Indian.

The kinship issue is discussed explicitly when Ethan and Martin return to the Jorgenson ranch after about a year of searching. Ethan wants Martin to stay behind, apparently because he plans to shoot Debbie now that she is a woman and defiled by Comanches. The next morning Ethan rides off alone; with reluctant help from Laurie, Martin follows in order to stop Ethan from harming Debbie. In the bunkhouse the night before, Ethan and Martin have this discussion:

- E: Jorgenson's been running my cattle with his own.
- M: Your cattle? You mean Debbie's cattle.
- E: He's agreed to take you on and split the increase in my herd while I'm gone. I'm pushing on tomorrow.
- M: Well, I sure ain't gonna stay here. I started out looking for Debbie, I intend to keep on.
- E: Why?
- M: Why? Well, because she's my—
- E: She's your nothin'. She's no kin to you at all.
- M: Well, I always thought she was—the way her folks took me in, they raised me—
- E: That don't make you no kin.
- M: All right, maybe it don't, but I intend to keep on lookin' anyway.
- E: How? You got any horses or money to buy them? You ain't even got money for cartridges. Jorgenson's offering you a good living here.
- Martin, there's something I want you to know—
- M: Ya, I know what you want me to know—that I got no kin, I got no money, no horses. All I got here is a bunch of dead man's clothes to wear. Well you told me that already so shut your mouth.

*We might pause at this figure of a cowboy lugging a saddle across the plains as two riders hurry by. Is this the same Martin who yesterday rode bareback and dressed and looked like an Indian boy? A day later he is grown up and looks like a white cowboy, a prime instance of the text's duplicity, gaining all the associations of boyhood, Indian, and nature boy in one scene, and of young manhood and white cowboy in the next. Moreover, the character has grown up in a day; we have now seen him, or we think we have, as a boy in the warmth of home and then a grown man on his own on the trail the next afternoon.

Later when they inspect recovered captives at the headquarters of a cavalry regiment, the officer asks them, "Who is this girl to you?" Martin says, "She's my—" Ethan cuts him off, "—niece." When they arrive at Scar's camp still later and are invited into his tent, Ethan tells Martin to wait outside. Martin pushes past him, saying, "Not likely." Ethan's remark may mean: I'll handle this business best without you, or You're too young for this; but it also includes: This is a family matter and you're not part of the family.

When Martin confronts Debbie, he appeals to their shared childhood to break through to her; but he is also seeking validation from her as the sole survivor of the family of his own claims to kinship by adoption.

- M: Debbie—
 D: Un mea.
 M: Debbie, don't you remember? I'm Martin. I'm Martin, your brother. Remember? Debbie, remember back. Do you remember how I used to let you ride my horse and tell you stories? Don't you remember me, Debbie?
 D: I remember—from always. At first, I prayed to you. Come and get me, take me home. You didn't come.
 M: But I've come now, Debbie.
 D: These are my people. Un mea, Go. Go, Martin, please.
 E: Stand aside, Martin.
 M: No you don't, Ethan. Ethan, no you don't.
 E: Stand aside.

What is going on in this scene is both obvious and subtle, overt and hidden. The adopted white and the adopted red confront each other and declare their kinship to each other. Martin seeks her return to white society, but he does not regard her marriage to Scar as any sort of disgrace. As one who is himself adopted, he cannot fault her loyalty to her new tribe; but as an adopted white, indeed as her brother, he must try to bring her back by any means. It is interesting also that just following this scene affirming the kinship of Martin and Debbie, Ethan formally disowns his kinship to Debbie.

- M: (reading) 'I, Ethan Edwards, being of sound mind* and without any blood kin, do hereby—
 E: Bequeath, it means leave.
 M: bequeath all my property of any kind to Martin Pawley.
 What do you mean you don't have any blood kin? Debbie's your blood kin.
 E: Not no more she ain't.
 M: Well you can keep your will. (throws it back) I don't want any of your property. And don't think I've forgot-

ten what you were fixin' to do to her. What kind of a man are you anyway—?

- E: She's been livin' with a buck! She's nothin but a—
 M: Shut your dirty mouth.
 I hope you die.
 E: That'll be the day.

Martin persists in asserting and acting on his kinship bond to Debbie despite all obstacles. One of these obstacles is Laurie, the woman he will marry. She reluctantly helps him to continue the search when Ethan abandons him after their first return home. On their second return home, they interrupt her wedding to Charlie McCorry and then prepare to join the Rangers and the Cavalry in an attack upon Scar.

- L: Marty, you're not going, not this time.
 M: Are you crazy?
 L: It's too late. She's a woman grown now.
 M: I've got to fetch her home.
 L: Fetch what home? The leavings of a Comanche buck, sold time and again to the highest bidder? With savages . . .
 M: Laurie, shut your mouth.
 L: You know what Ethan will do if he has a chance—he'll put a bullet in her brain and tell you Martha would want it.
 M: Only if I'm dead.

In front of Scar's camp, Clayton gives the order to go in at sun-up. Martin says, "Just a minute, Reverend, we go chargin' in they'll kill her and you know it." Ethan: "That's what I'm counting on." Martin: "I know you are." Clayton: "Son, there's more at stake here than your sister." Ethan agrees and tells Martin that a scalp on Scar's lance belonged to his mother. Martin is given pause, then says, "But that doesn't change anything. That changes nothing!" He proposes to sneak into the village to save Debbie before the attack and does so, disguising himself as an Indian—with blanket and no shirt, but with white man's gun and holster under his blanket. Ethan opposes this but Clayton agrees. He finds Debbie and wakes her, saying, "Debbie, it's your brother, Marty. I'm going to get you out of here." She is disoriented a moment then says, "Yes, Marty. Oh yes, Marty." He kills Scar, who has been alerted by Debbie's scream, and the Ranger attack begins. Ethan enters the village, scalps Scar, then rides after Debbie, separating her from Martin. Martin tries to pull Ethan from his horse but cannot. As Ethan rides after Debbie, Martin chases on foot, his hand on his gun, saying "No, Ethan, no!" Ethan does not

*Surely this is one of the film's little jokes.

shoot Debbie but picks her up and takes her home.

The Laurie-Martin relation deserves a note. Whether or not Martin is a kin to the Edwards family has no bearing on his marrying Laurie: but the unconscious content of the kinship point, that he is a red man adopted by white society, does bear upon it. Even on the surface of the text, if Martin is a 'breed', a blankethead, if Ethan is discomfited by sitting at the family table with him, then a fortiori he should be opposed to Martin's marrying a white woman. Yet neither Ethan nor anyone else in the film even hints at this. In the bunkhouse scene Ethan notices Laurie's attraction to Martin with amusement as she kisses Martin good-night. Also, in urging Martin to stay on at the Jorgenson ranch, he apparently accepts the inevitable match between Laurie and Martin. When they return the second time and Laurie appears in a wedding dress he says to Martin with a smile, "It looks like you two have a lot to talk about." He looks on the fight between Martin and Charlie McCorry with good-natured neutrality.

Martin is the evident favorite of Laurie from the beginning and, it seems, of her mother also. Her father seems not to care, with perhaps a preference for Charlie, for whatever reason. The film is well under way before we see Laurie at all. She is seen in long shot at the funeral, barely coming into medium shot in a frame with several other things happening also. She says a silent good-bye to Martin, who seems awkward until he turns from her and mounts his horse.

When Martin returns for one day a year later, Laurie calls his name irritably and kisses him, to both of which he responds as though barely awake. Laurie's mother asks if he knows her name, he says "Sure I do, her name's Laurie, but I darned near forgot just how pretty she was." The next morning, after more kissing, he suggests that they go steady; she replies that they've been going steady "since they was three" and it's about time he found out about it. Her claim to an early closeness could not be proved by Martin's behavior. Upon the second return, Martin offers to go away so that Laurie can marry Charlie; she replies that if he does, she'll die. (Never was the break-up of a wedding done so inertly.) Laurie tries hard to prevent Martin from going to the final attack on Scar but he goes anyway. Despite her threats not to wait for him, Laurie does wait each time and joins him in the

final tableau as they walk into the house.

In the sexual relationship with Laurie, Martin is almost totally passive. The idea of the relationship seems to be hers as does each step that furthers it or reinforces it. Of course this reversal of traditional roles is one of the running gags of the film. It is carried even to a bathtub scene in which the male is the object of voyeurism and horseplay and comically asserts his outraged modesty. Martin at no time displays physical desire for Laurie or a desire to marry her nor does he at any time hurry to get back to her. Martin is the love object whom Laurie chooses and seeks out. She conspicuously desires him, a desire that is presented as physical, indeed as violent, with hard kisses, pushes that knock down furniture, and a constantly agitated voice, alternating between a quaver and a screech.

The running argument between Ethan and Martin concerns in part the issue of kinship by blood *versus* kinship by adoption. In context this is strictly a family matter—Martin is not a blood kin of the Edwards family and therefore, to Ethan, he has no reason to continue to search for Debbie. But altered slightly—kinship reckoned by blood *only* versus kinship reckoned by adoption also—it is also an anthropological issue, having to do with the relations between races and societies. In tracing "the Martin complex" through the film we have also traced the line of a textual duplicity. Martin functions now as part-Indian, now as pure white, while in the unconscious symbolics of the film he functions as pure Indian. This "duplicity" is merely the effect of unconscious structures breaking the surface of the film at several points. It is now time to address those structures and to relate them to the dilemma of this film's power on audiences. If Martin functions as an Indian, is *The Searchers* readable as a myth about the adoption and integration of Indians in white society? Does this account for its power?

Of course, adoption is an ideological notion, a "savage" thinking of social problems and relations on the model of the family and family relations, precisely the sort of logic one finds in myths. In fact, there are historical grounds for considering the integration of Indians into American society under the rubric of "adoption," at least in that in American history the detribalization of Indians was a conscious policy.

Ethan
brings
Debbie
'home'
to
white
society

(Photos:
MOMA)



Meanwhile, Congress proceeded to attempt Indian detribalization. In March of 1871, the treaty system of dealing with the Indians was ended by congressional enactment. The intent of the legislation was clear; Grant and Congress wanted the Indian civilized and Christianized. Since the tribal system was in the way, it would be circumvented. The Indian was supposed to finally become a full participant in American society, but he was to do it as individual, not as a member of a tribe.¹⁴

But this does not make integration of Indians into American society, including intermarriage, an issue that requires unconscious treatment or that stirs audiences profoundly. It may have been an issue in 1868, but it was hardly one in 1956. Indeed, there were very few anti-miscegenation statutes regarding Indians at any time.

Of the various laws which penalized illicit miscegenation, none applied to Indians, and only North Carolina's (and Virginia's for a very brief period) prohibited intermarriage. On the contrary, several colonists were willing to allow, even advocate, intermarriage with the Indians—an unheard of proposition concerning Negroes. . . . It is suggestive, too, that Virginia's statutory definition of mulattoes extended the taint of Negro ancestry through three generations and of Indian ancestry through only one.¹⁵

Winthrop Jordan demonstrates Thomas Jefferson's praise of the Indian and his denigration of blacks; and argues that his views, while extreme, are emblematic of American views generally.¹⁶ Jefferson believed that in altered circumstances Indians would become white men, a transformation he thought the Negro could never accomplish. He hoped for the cultural and physical amalgamation of Indians and white Americans. "In truth the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people." Such amalgamation and identification were pre-

cisely what Jefferson most abhorred with the Negro.

Will Rogers, who made three films with Ford in the thirties, and who had more Indian blood than the Martin character in *The Searchers*, expressed the positive view Americans have had of the Indian, at least in modern times.

My ancestors didn't come over on the Mayflower, but they met the boat. . . . My father was one-eighth Cherokee Indian, and my mother was a quarter-blood Cherokee. I never got far enough in arithmetic to figure out just how much "Injun" that makes me, but there's nothing of which I am more proud than my Cherokee blood.¹⁷

The emotional impact of *The Searchers* can hardly come from the issue of the kinship status and marriageability of an Indian in white society in 1956. This issue cannot be the locus of that unconscious conflict in knowledge or social life that activates every effective myth and fixes the attention of its listeners, according to Lévi-Strauss. It becomes explicable only if we substitute black for red and read a film about red-white relations in 1868–1873 as a film about black-white relations in 1956.

What does the opposition "kinship by blood *versus* kinship by adoption" have to do with the situation of blacks in the United States in 1956? Of course, blacks were detribalized with utmost violence by the acts that took them into slavery. As servants of plantations their own social organization was forcibly structured in relation to white society; but the questions we have considered under the rubric of "adoption" perhaps arose only with the first freed slaves and runaways. As late as 1857, the Supreme Court ruled in the Dred Scott case that Negro slaves and their descendants were not citizens of the United States or of the

individual states and that prohibiting slavery deprived persons of their property without due process of law under the Fifth Amendment. In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation freed slaves in areas in rebellion against the United States. Constitutional amendments in 1865, 1868, and 1870 conferred citizenship on blacks ("all persons born or naturalized in the United States"), guaranteed their rights against the individual states, and guaranteed them the right to vote ("regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude").

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court announced *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, its most important decision of modern times, some say the most important of its history. *Brown* held that in public education the doctrine of separate but equal was inherently unequal and therefore violated the black students' right to "equal protection of the laws" under the Fourteenth Amendment. Because it foresaw difficulties in desegregating schools kept apart for decades and (though it did not say so) anticipated resistance to its decision, the Court postponed its implementation decree for one year, while it considered briefs and oral arguments on the point.

May 1954–May 1955 saw heated debate of *Brown*, including many defiant statements against it. "I shall use every legal means at my command to continue segregated schools in Virginia." "[The South] will not abide by or obey this legislative decision by a political court." The Court's decision reduced the Constitution to "a scrap of paper"; any effort to integrate the South will lead to "great strife and turmoil." The Florida brief on enforcement cited a poll showing that three-fourths of the white leaders of the state disagreed with the *Brown* decision, that 30% disagreed "violently" and that 13% of peace officers said they would enforce state attendance laws at racially mixed schools.¹⁸ The later "Southern Manifesto" by Senators and Congressmen from eleven states dismissed the Court's use of "naked judicial power" to legislate and pledged its signers to use all lawful means to reverse the decision and to prevent the use of force in its implementation.*

Resistance to school desegregation was far more fierce and lasted far longer than resistance to the ending of other segregation practices during this period.

Desegregation progressed at a relatively rapid rate in a relatively peaceable manner in most areas—from the restaurants of Washington to the buses of Montgomery to the ball-parks of the Texas League. One area alone was excepted: the schools. Streetcars and eating places and amusement parks were, after all, settings for transients who shared proximity for a limited period of time; schools were something else. There the contact would last for six or eight hours daily; it was from interaction with one another as much as attention devoted to lesson books or lectures that school children derived the essence of their education. And so it was the schoolhouse that became the arena for the South's fiercest resistance to the desegregation order of the Supreme Court.¹⁹

Fear of intermarriage between black and white was one ground of opposition to *Brown*, explicit and implicit. Several states mention it in their briefs and cross-examinations.²⁰ Miscegenation was not cited more often as a likely consequence of *Brown* because in 1955 twenty-nine states had statutes forbidding blacks and whites to marry. (These were struck down as unconstitutional only in 1967.)

It was in the midst of the *Brown* upheaval that the writing of the screenplay for *The Searchers* and other preparations for filming took place. The novel by Alan LeMay was published in 1954, Merian C. Cooper bought it that year for filming by John Ford with John Wayne, under a production company just formed by C. V. Whitney. According to *Motion Picture Herald*, the shooting of *The Searchers* took place between June 25 and August 27, 1955. (It was released on May 26, 1956.) I have not been able to determine exactly when Frank Nugent wrote the screenplay, but it was almost surely between early or mid-1954 and the first half of 1955, the period that coincides with the initial *Brown* uproar.

We cannot do here a detailed analysis of Nugent's adaptation of LeMay's novel; but several of the features of the film with which we have been most concerned were added by Nugent. In the novel Martin is 100% white, hence there is no conflict between Martin and Ethan about race;*

*By 1970 much of the South was in substantial compliance with *Brown*. In 1971 the Court somewhat redefined the *Brown* standard around the notion of racial balance and the focus of enforcement, and resistance, shifted to the North.

*In addition to the meanings we have traced, this change is simply good screen writing: it introduces a dramatic conflict between the two principals that heightens and transforms the significance of their external adventures.

but Ethan does try twice to shoot Debbie and Martin attempts to stop him. Martin does not enter Scar's village alone; he charges with the Rangers in the final battle and finds Debbie gone. Ethan is killed in the battle while running down an Indian girl he thinks is Debbie; she is not Debbie, she pulls a gun from a horse and shoots him. Debbie, who has not been Scar's (or anyone's) wife or mistress, but is described as a dusky Indian maiden, has escaped to the desert. Martin trails her there and starts to make love to her on the last page. Laurie has married Charlie McCorry much earlier.

There were two great issues involved in *Brown*: the substantive question of desegregating public schools and changing the relations between black and white races and the constitutional question of securing obedience to federal law. To certain Americans perhaps not enthusiastic about desegregation, *Brown* and the open declarations of defiance to it precipitated the most serious constitutional crisis since the Civil War and Reconstruction. In discussions at the time it was said again and again that decisions of the Supreme Court were "the law of the land" or "part of the law of the land." But whether one started from the desire for justice between the races or started from the need for compliance to law, one came logically to the same problem: how to achieve desegregation and what its consequence, near and far, were likely to be. If one began with law as an abstract principle one was perhaps more likely to approach the problem backwards and in an unconscious way. This is pervasively so in a realm of "savage thought" like the construction of fictions. It is an even more complicated process in a case like *The Searchers* where a structure pre-existing the *Brown* situation is adapted under its (unconscious) pressure. This is what Lévi-Strauss calls the *bricolage* principle: myth makes its structures out of the diverse materials at hand.

We have described the opposition between kinship by blood and kinship by adoption as a kind of mythic fulcrum—it carries both the family dispute of the story and (covertly) the social dispute of great concern to its audience. But how are we to understand the film's elaboration and treatment of the social issue, that is, of *Brown* and its consequences? At first glance, the film's treatment seems quite clear once the conversion from story issue to social issue is made.

As noted, the running argument of Ethan and Martin treats the issue explicitly. Martin asserts kinship by adoption by acting in all respects as though Debbie were literally his blood kin. He insists on participating in every stage of the search for her and, finally, on risking his life to save her. His devotion to her transcends other obligations and filiations; he defends her against Indians (Scar) and whites (Ethan and the attacking Cavalry) and leaves Laurie (twice) to secure Debbie's safety.

Ethan asserts Martin's lack of kinship to Debbie (and to himself) both as a general point of principle (the interview with the Cavalry officer) and as a means of dissuading him from continuing the search (the bunkhouse talk at the end of the first search). Ethan's insistence on literal blood lines in determining kinship, its privileges and obligations, is historically the position of the segregationist and white supremacist. Ethan returns to his brother's ranch from the Civil War in which he fought on the Southern side; he still wears his Confederate coat and carries his sabre. He refuses to recognize the surrender of the South and to take any oath subsequent to his oath to defend the Confederacy. These features mark Ethan as a white Southerner, displaced out west.* This identification occurs partly on the surface of the film but is rendered unreadable in various ways. For one thing, Ethan lacks a Southern accent, which would give the game away every time he spoke of race or looked at Martin askance. Also, John Wayne was associated by audiences with Westerners, not Southerners; the references to the Civil War are taken as character points or preface. There is no mention of the issues of the Civil War or, at any time, of blacks. Also, except for the dinner-table scene and the ride out after the lost cattle at the beginning, Ethan's anti-Indian attitudes are motivated by the plot—"He is bitter about Martha"; hence there is no reason to see them as the film's displacement of anti-black attitudes.

There is another signification set clustered around Ethan: that of outlawism. His not accept-

*In fact, the Central Texas region of *The Searchers* was settled mainly by Southerners before and after the Civil War. Aaron speaks of a neighbor's having gone back to chopping cotton. See Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence* (New York: Oxford, 1975), Chapter 8, "The Violent Region of Central Texas," pp. 236-299.

ing the surrender of his side in a war that is long over makes him at least a figurative outlaw. He boasts that he still has his sabre, "didn't turn it into no ploughshare either." (That sabre, through the mediation of a green lieutenant, is later thrust up the ass of the Reverend Captain Clayton, symbol of religious and civil authority in the film.) Ethan was missing for three years between the end of the Civil War and 1868, when the film opens; there are hints that he was an outlaw during this time. "You fit a lot of descriptions," says Clayton. He shows up on the Texas frontier with a bagful of fresh \$20 pieces, about the origin of which he is vague. Ethan does shoot Futterman and his two men in the back, making no attempt to take them alive; and he takes back his gold pieces, given in trade for information. This episode gets Ethan and Martin in actual trouble with the law; Clayton takes Ethan's gun and orders him to Austin to answer questions. The Cavalry enters with news of Scar, Ethan's gun is returned, and the film drops the matter. Throughout the film, Ethan violates the religious and social law of his people by desecrating dead Indians, by scalping his enemies, by attempting to murder his kin for marrying a Comanche, etc.

Racism was always immoral and undemocratic but *Brown* made some of its most fundamental institutions illegal. Thus *The Searchers* specifically conjoins the figure of the white Southerner with the figure of the outlaw. (In the novel Ethan came right home after the Civil War and had no bagful of money or other indicia of the outlaw and he is no more anti-Indian than Martin or any of the other main characters.) After *Brown*, opposing the possibility of kinship by adoption, affirming kinship by blood only, places one outside the law. Thus Ethan's exclusion from the community at the end of the film is overdetermined by its unconscious structure.

Martin in effect wins the argument with Ethan by saving Debbie and by returning home to marry Laurie and settle in the community. Ethan returns home only to move on again. He is self-excluded from the community but, as Propp shows, this is functionally similar to forcible exclusion, just as self-dispatch and dispatch by another are equivalent functions. Note that the figure of the white Southerner often functions as a scapegoat on the race question. Our racial prejudice and our guilt

for it are placed on his shoulders, then he is criticized, excluded, or lampooned, mythically purging us of them. Thus, in *The Searcher*, Ethan is excluded for our sins; that is why we find it so moving.

The film's ending thus enacts Martin's position; the adopted one marries and enters the community as an adult male. He enjoys the full rights of kinship. But it is not so simple as this, for a number of reasons. First, Martin and Ethan debate several issues, not just this one, and the film treats the issue of kinship and race in many ways besides their arguments. Secondly, what we have called "Martin's victory" is implicit in *Brown*: if the film merely affirmed the non-white's entry into white society and opposed those who oppose that entry, it might not have as great power on audiences as it has. At least it would not bear on the issue of greatest concern once *Brown* is a *fait accompli*: what will the consequences of desegregation be?

The film concerns not only the fact of adoption, the right to adoption under the new law of the land, but the nature and scope of adoption, its rights and obligations. Are the adopted ones equal in rights and obligations to those who have always belonged to the society? Martin wins the argument with Ethan, but what is the price of that victory?

The film does not deal with the adoption itself, the finding of Martin of Ethan, the growing up years, etc.—those matters in the forefront of discussion and awareness in the debate over *Brown*. Rather, it looks to the other end of the adoption spectrum, that which is implied in adoption but not immediately palpable to the senses or to the imagination: What will happen when the adopted one grows up and enters white society as an adult? Thus in *The Searchers* Martin's adoption is a *fait accompli*, a long-settled and accepted fact. The film focuses not on the adoption process, but on the status, rights, duties, and responsibilities of the adopted one when grown.

Although it is a myth about non-whites by and for whites, *The Searchers* may also be read as a manual for non-whites adopted by white society, telling them what they may expect and what is expected of them. In our analysis of the Martin complex in the film, we saw that Martin exhibits unwavering loyalty to the white community. He kills Indian men, spurns Indian wives, even defends his sister against other whites. He devotes

five years to finding her, then risks his life to kill the villain and save her. Martin's passivity in regard to Laurie is also exemplary. The non-white can show no aggressiveness toward a white love-object; if Martin is the example, he can hardly show or feel desire at all. Martin postpones pleasure in the Freudian sense. Laurie offers herself and the pleasures of peaceful life at home again and again, but he refuses until his mission is done. This may be read diachronically (à la Propp) that Martin cannot marry Laurie and enter society as an adult until he has proven himself as fully white, indeed as whiter than white, by the incredible number of performances that he accomplishes. Or it may be read synchronically à la Lévi-Strauss and Lacan: Martin immediately enjoys full white citizenship and kinship (and even wins Laurie) but this creates a *debt*, according to this film an enormous debt, that he must discharge in exchange for this gift. The debt for the non-white is evidently far greater than for whites. On the opposite end of the spectrum from Martin, the good Indian (nigger), there is Scar, the bad Indian (nigger). Scar precisely cannot postpone pleasure—he rapes, murders, dismembers, burns; he is punished in the most brutal way: death, scalping, destruction of his society. The annihilating punishment that Scar receives is also a warning to adopted non-whites of what awaits their transgressions. Correlated with Scar's crimes is the fact that he remains with his tribe, with his people, whereas Martin renounces any tribal tie, loyalty, or memory; this is the pre-condition of adoption.

Our reading is non-reductive—the Indian-white ideological theme remains. There is in fact a kind of double displacement operating in the film at almost every moment, whereby literal events of the text may be read in the Indian-white register and then in the black-white register. But if our concern is the power of a myth, then it is the black-white discourse that must interest us. Power selects a myth; the myth does not create it. Black-white relations were such in 1956, and arguably now as well, that the issues *The Searchers* treats could not be treated directly. This hiddenness is the mark of conflicts of great power and the continuing power of *The Searchers* confirms audience contact with conflicts of great importance to itself but not understood by it. As the Rev. Jesse Jackson said

recently, "Racism is the curse of the American soul." As long as this remains true, *The Searchers* is likely to retain its power.

NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the American Seminar on Film, supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in November, 1975. I am grateful to Swank Pictures, Inc., for making available a print of *The Searchers*.

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20. *Ibid.*, see pp. 6, 28, 672, 751, among others.

FOR SALE: Unique and very comprehensive collection of movie magazines (mainly American), stills, books, etc. 1909 to 1940. Invaluable source of information for film research institute, university library or private collector. R. Davis, 99 St. Leonards Road, Windsor, Berks, England.

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⁸ **The Anatomy of a Proletarian Film: Warner's "Marked Woman"**

Charles W. Eckert

Film Quarterly, Vol. 27, No. 2. (Winter, 1973-1974), pp. 10-24.

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